

Saudi Arabia's Media Empire: keeping the masses at home

By Andrew Hammond

October, 2007. Since the 1990-1 Gulf crisis when the United States used Saudi Arabia as a launchpad for a campaign to evict occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia has used the Arab media as a key area for responding to perceived threats to the leadership's legitimacy and stability such as challenges to its alliance with the United States and criticism of its political system, decision-making processes and image in the Arab world. The immediate Saudi response to the Gulf crisis was launching the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), established as a private television enterprise by a brother-in-law of King Fahd, Walid al-Ibrahim. Subsequently, Prince Khaled bin Sultan, leader of Saudi forces in the 1991 war and son of current Crown Prince Sultan, consolidated his control over London-based pan-Arab daily newspaper *Al Hayat* while sons of Riyadh governor Prince Salman consolidated their control over *Al Hayat's* London-based competitor *Asharq al-Awsat*. A minor Saudi prince set up the Orbit entertainment TV network in 1994 and businessman Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and business partner Saleh Kamel established the Arab Radio and Television entertainment network (ART) the same year. In recent years these three networks, MBC, Orbit and ART, have saturated Arab viewers in Arab and Western entertainment, led by Hollywood movies, American sitcoms and talkshows.

Powered by vast petrodollar resources, thus began a concerted Saudi attempt to dominate the world of cable and satellite television media in the Arab world and steal the thunder of Egypt, once the leader of Arab media in the 1950s and 1960s with its Arab nationalist political ideology. Egypt's once omnipotent "media of mobilization" (*i'lam ta'bawi*) gave way to Saudi Arabia's "media of pacification", or *i'lam tanwimi*—a new soporific media of arguably far greater proportions and reach than anything Gamal Abdel-Nasser ever had, where entertainment helps put the political mind to sleep and politics is maintained within strict limits.¹ If Abdel-Nasser wanted you *fi-shari'* (on the streets), Al Saud wants you *fi-sala* (in the living room).

Despite this Saudi dominion, Qatar's Al Jazeera entered the fray in 1996 with a ground-breaking news policy that filled the glaring gaps in political and social coverage of the Saudi media, with frank discussions of internal situations in Arab countries where opposition and government figures were equally welcome to offer their viewpoint. Saudi Arabia's response to Al Jazeera came in 2003 with Al Arabiya. Part of the MBC network, Al Arabiya came on-air after the September 11 attacks and just in time for the second Iraq invasion when Saudi leaders were correct in assuming they were due for a round of anti-Saudi sentiment similar to that which followed the 1991 Gulf war. Saudi leaders felt uncomfortable and vulnerable. Reports circulated in the Western media of recommendations in Washington to break up the kingdom, occupy the Eastern Province, or establish a state in the Hejaz where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located.

¹ I owe the phrase *i'lam ta'bawi* to Egyptian journalist and political activist Salah Issa in interview, June 2002.

Saudi Arabia wanted to present the United States with a vision of “moderation” in the Arab world to counter Al Jazeera’s hip rejectionism when it came to massive Western political influence in the region and Al Jazeera’s willingness to treat the ideology of Islamist groups like al-Qa’ida as worthy of debate. Al Arabiya’s managers, notably general manager Abdel-Rahman al-Rashed, talked publicly of presenting more “balanced” coverage than Al Jazeera, which had run into trouble with virtually every Arab government over their close ties with the United States and opposition criticism that those governments were not doing enough to champion Arab causes such as the Palestinians during their uprising against Israeli occupation that began in September 2000. The channel has mixed its 24-hours news coverage with a liberal amount of “light news”—to the degree that one bulletin in June 2007 replete with scenes of carnage in Iraq included an item about bubblegum Lebanese pop singer Haifaa Wahbeh surviving an accident “by a miracle” while shooting a music video. Al Arabiya’s agenda took some months after the Iraq war to manifest itself clearly in the eyes of viewers. After the Iraq war, Al Arabiya ran numerous documentaries and discussion shows about mass graves and other human rights abuses in pre-invasion Iraq in what may have been taken by viewers as an effort to create a balanced debate about tyranny, democracy and nationalism in the Arab world. To others, the programs appeared aimed at undermining the Iraqi insurgency which had wide support among public opinion throughout the Arab world. For some time the Bush administration placed both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in the same category of Arab “obstructionism” and “extremism” because of their coverage of the Iraqi insurgency against the U.S. occupation. Both channels were banned for two weeks from covering official activities in Iraq in September 2003, but in May 2004

President Bush chose Al Arabiya over Al Jazeera for an Arab media interview to answer charges of torture of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison. Washington had clearly established by this time who was on its side and who wasn't.²

Islamist web sites had by this time begun to refer to Al Arabiya dismissively as *Al 'Ibriya* or “the Hebrew Channel”—recognition of a perceived desire to win American approval through granting considerable space to American officials and their allies in Iraq and elsewhere to explain their policies. Islamists also sensed Al Arabiya's opposition to political Islam, whether it was Al Qaeda or otherwise. Like Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya designed powerful montages of Israeli soldiers putting down the Intifada, set to a background of stirring music, but unlike Al Jazeera it did the same to discredit the activities of the Islamist insurgency movement in Saudi Arabia. One of these short pieces referred to a shootout in Mecca between Saudi police and Islamist rebels in June 2003 after which the Saudi authorities said they had found copies of the Quran rigged with explosives. The words “Qurans booby-trapped with bombs” flicked across the screen, inviting Saudi viewers to consider the heretical *uber*-violence of al-Qaeda.³ Al Arabiya aired some videotaped messages from Iraqi insurgent groups, but never anything from Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri—if they were lucky—they might get a mention in the news ticker along the bottom of the screen. On Al Jazeera, by contrast, by

² Interviews on al-Arabiya and Alhurra, 5 May 2004.

³ Saudi militants rigged Koran with explosives: report,” *Reuters*, 13 November 2003.

September 2003 two years after the attacks in New York and Washington guests felt sufficiently confident to make reverential references to bin Laden as “Sheikh Osama.”⁴

Arab nationalism has been no less a threat to Saudi Arabia than these recent manifestations of political Islam, and the treatment of Arab nationalism on Al Arabiya has reflected this accordingly. Al Arabiya aired a series called *Ayyam al-Sayyid al-Arabi* (The Days of Mr Arab) in 2006 in what appeared to be an attempt to discredit this ideology of resistance to Western hegemony in response to Al Jazeera’s show *Ma’ Heikal* (With Heikal) featuring Mohammed Hassanein Heikal. Heikal was the confidante of Gamal Abdel-Nasser and has remained since then a journalist with privileged access to Arab and foreign leaders. He is accorded enormous respect throughout the Arab world, partly because of the impressive independence and credibility he has maintained for such a well-connected journalist. In 2003 Al Jazeera launched *Ma’ Heikal* where Heikal examined historical documentation and added to that his own recollections in order to analyse the interaction between Arab states, the West and Israel during the long stretch of the decolonization period. This has inevitably involved criticism of Saudi policy. When Heikal first appeared on Al Jazeera after the Iraq invasion, he said that when he came to decide which Arabic channel was the best platform for his analysis, Bush’s decision in plumping for Al Arabiya in May 2004 had pushed him towards Al Jazeera.

To observe close-up how Saudi media influence operates I’ve chosen an episode from earlier this year in the endless mudfights and slanging matches that go on in the

⁴ Comments by Hani Sibai and Abdel-Bari Atwan in 10 September 2003 discussion of video footage of bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Arab media. In April Al Jazeera ran an in-depth interview with Heikal spread over two hour-long programs in which he discussed the regional political situation in light of the tension between Iran and the United States over Iran's nuclear energy program and Saudi diplomatic efforts to regulate various regional political disputes, notably with the Mecca agreement in February 2007 that established a short-lived Palestinian unity government between Hamas and Fatah.⁵ Heikal was direct in his criticism of the Saudi diplomacy led by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former Saudi ambassador to the United States and intimate friend of the Bush family, in particular the idea that Iran should be considered an Arab enemy, and placed Saudi efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict within a context of providing the United States with a fig leaf for military action against Iran.

Heikal appeared to have hit the mark. Saudi media immediately and comprehensively swung into action to belittle Heikal. The strongest response came in an opinion piece by the editor of the Saudi daily *al-Riyadh*, Turki al-Sudairy. *Al-Riyadh* is owned by group of businessmen and thus officially independent, but it is in effect under the control of Riyadh governor Prince Salman. Journalists on the paper say Sudairy was obliged to write his rebuttal.⁶ The title of the article sets a tone which is typical of this kind of attack on the credibility of particularly effective critics—*ajir li-ajir*, which might be translated as “from one hireling/hired pen, to another.”⁷ The implication was that Heikal was paid to throw mud by a channel that is in turn also paid to throw mud. Sudairy accused Heikal of having been an official “state writer” in Nasser's period, or the

⁵ Ma' Heikal, Al Jazeera, 26-27 April 2007.

⁶ Conversation with journalist (named withheld), 3 May 2007.

⁷ “Ajir li-ajir,” *al-Riyadh*, 29 April 2007.

leading scribe in the state media who reveals to the masses and the world, through hints or more directly, the thoughts of the leadership. As former editor of *al-Ahram*, Egypt's flagship state paper, this he undoubtedly was. But Sudairy said Heikal had subsequently mounted an unsuccessful bid to become Saudi Arabia's official scribe, before finally finding a new home in Qatar. "Finally, Heikal found an opportunity to be a 'state writer' but in a statelet with hardly half a million people, when this mole of a country (*habbat al-khal*) Qatar made him its clownish official spokesperson ... against the kingdom, which I can affirm does not pay him any attention," Sudairy wrote. "This is Heikal—pay him and he'll say anything ... It's difficult to accept any information from a hired pen who has not been deterred by the fact that he is now eighty years old. And what makes it worse is that he is a hired pen working for another hired pen."

Two regular columnists in the Prince Salman family vehicle *Asharq al-Awsat* also laid into Heikal. Mamoun Fandy, an Egyptian columnist and senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, accused him of arrogance and going beyond the limits of political politesse for attacking the "Arab peace initiative" launched under Saudi sponsorship in March 2007 and describing Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak—a close Saudi ally—of "living in a world of fantasy" in the Sinai tourist resort of Sharm al-Sheikh.⁸ Employing humor, Fandy mocked Heikal's attack on diplomatic envoy Prince Bandar, writing: "If a camel's leg went lame in Never-Never Land, he [Heikal] would say Prince Bandar bin Sultan was behind it."⁹ Heikal in his Al Jazeera

⁸ Robert Fisk. "Mohamed Hassanein Heikal: The wise man of the Middle East," *The Independent*, 9 April 2007.

⁹ "Wa-khitamuhu Fisk," *Asharq al-Awsat*, 30 April 2007.

appearance had claimed that he had taken former U.S. Secretary of State William Rodgers into his bathroom for secret conversations that could not be picked up by surveillance. Playing on the double meaning of the phrase *al-'ada al-sirriyya* (literally, “secret habit” but also a euphemism for masturbation) Fandy wrote: “Heikal practiced the same ‘secret habit’ on his farm at Birqash whenever he wanted to discuss confidential affairs, as he told Al Jazeera, since the Israel Academic Bureau is located in the floor below his apartment in Cairo.”

Finally, Lebanese columnist Samir Atallah wrote a more sobre critique of Heikal in another piece in *Asharq al-Awsat*. “We don’t know how long Heikal will continue writing history from one perspective, repeating the same thing and the same conviction, forgetting that he has a special responsibility since he is not an ordinary historian or journalist but a political and ideological figure from a critical period during the nation’s history,” he wrote.¹⁰ It wasn’t until the last paragraph of the article that it transpired that Attallah was in fact writing to refute Heikal’s criticism of Saudi Arabia. His closing words: “Saudi Arabia entered into conflicts with Nasserist Egypt on its own borders, not the borders of Egypt, and in its own cities not those of Egypt. As for Egypt’s wars with Israel, Saudi Arabia joined them alongside Egypt in a manner that no one understands more than Heikal. Saudi Arabia also helped Egypt in its war of attrition, militarily and economically.”

¹⁰ “Kitabatu l-tarikh mas’alatun mawdu’iyyatun,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 30 April 2007.

This is just one example of a phenomenon that consistently repeats itself in the Arab media and in particular with respect to Saudi Arabia. It demonstrates the power of the Saudi media to respond to criticism, its intolerance to criticism, and its use of non-Saudi writers—the coopted liberal intelligentsia—to deliver the counterpunches. Saudi influence reaches far and wide into many other areas. When Rafiq Hariri was Lebanon’s prime minister in 2003, the Lebanese government cut transmission of New TV over a programme that examined the effect of the U.S. invasion of Iraq on Saudi Arabia’s domestic political situation. When an Egyptian doctor was imprisoned in Saudi Arabia in 1994 for complaining to the authorities over the alleged rape of his son by a Saudi schoolteacher, Egypt’s state-owned newspapers avoided the story for fear of offending the kingdom. Throughout the 1990s there were numerous instances of censorship or state prosecution of newspapers and journalists in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and GCC countries for unfavorable coverage of Saudi affairs.

The only major challenge to what Naomi Sakr has called this “Saudi space” (*al-fada` al-sa`udi*) comes from Al Jazeera, and to a much lesser degree Hizbollah’s Al Manar television, the London-based newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* and a host of opposition and independent newspapers around the region.¹¹ This Al Jazeera challenge is considerable and is a major headache for Saudi leaders. While Al Arabiya is displayed in Saudi embassies as Saudi Arabia’s official mouthpiece, Al Jazeera’s correspondents are vindictively denied access to Saudi Arabia and Saudi companies refrain from advertising to avoid the ire of the Saudi government. Reports that Al Jazeera remains the most

¹¹ Naomi Sakr. *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*. I.B.Tauris, 2001.

watched news channel appear to considerably irk Saudi Arabia. A joint University of Maryland and Zogby International poll of viewers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates in October 2005 found that Al Jazeera was ahead with 65 percent of viewers, followed by a host of Saudi-owned or Saudi-friendly channels—Al Arabiya, with 34 percent, and MBC1, LBC, Abu Dhabi Television and the Egyptian Satellite Channel. *Asharq al-Awsat* attacked the poll saying it led respondents on by listing Al Jazeera first in the formulation of questions and using a small polling sample in Saudi Arabia. Oddly, though, the article still boasted that “Al Arabiya came first in the poll as the most-watched second choice channel”.¹²

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia has made an immense effort to control the flow of information in the Arab world and assure positive coverage of its politics and society, or often to assure no coverage at all. This effort has involved saturating the Arab viewer in Arab and Western entertainment in the form of dramas, quiz shows, comedies, films, and “soft religion” and only as much politics as is necessary. Saudi Arabia’s pan-Arab media empire promotes specific messages which present themselves as “liberal”, “reformist”, “moderate” and “modern”, but they are also conspicuously Washington-friendly and anti-al-Qa‘ida, Hizbullah, Iran or any other body presenting a challenge to the Pax Americana in the Arab world and the governments who form part of that constellation. This media presence has been constantly evolving; it was not until 2003 that the response to Al Jazeera came with Al Arabiya and by this time the pan-Arab media had become a useful tool for the ruling elite to challenge Islamists and promote a limited Saudi domestic

¹² “Leading Arab Television Stations Reject Zogby Report”, www.asharq-e.com, 2 January 2006.

agenda of openness which has involved co-opting as many “liberal intellectuals” as possible. While Al Jazeera has been the strongest challenger of this media empire, it will be interesting to see what impact the BBC’s new Arabic television channel, due to start later this year, will have on the scene.

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